The Fourth Church Pulpit

BUT DO NOT THOU FORGET ME

[Including comments on the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)]

July 21, 1996

John M. Buchanan

Long View

Rest assured, Presbyterians,
that whatever we do here, today,
this world will - somehow - manage
to survive, whatever of wisdom
or of folly we solemnly unleash
upon creation, lovers still
will lie abed, and infants,
persistent, will perish from want
of food, of caresses, of those
who will keep faith with that One
who turned water, toppled tables,
and touches one and all with
the lingering prospect of life.

J. Barrie Shepherd
Albuquerque, N.M.
July 6, 1996

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut Street Chicago, Il 60611-2094
Phone: (312) 787-4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

COMMENTS BY JOHN M. BUCHANAN, MODERATOR
208TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)
JULY 21, 1996, 8:30 AND 11:00 A.M. WORSHIP SERVICES
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO

The last time I was in worship was June 16, the Sunday before going to Albuquerque for the 208th General Assembly. A lot has happened since that time. It's been one of the most intense periods in my life. As you know, I was elected Moderator of the 208th General Assembly, and in that many of you were invested in the process of my running or standing for office, supporting me, encouraging me and advising me, and in that this election will have something to do with the life of this congregation I'd like to take just a moment or two and talk about it.

First, what's a Moderator? We Presbyterians were born as a faith tradition in the midst of the Protestant Reformation and our system of church government was put in place in Scotland in the Sixteenth Century. We have, from the very beginning, been a non-hierarchical church. We're not much for grandeur and ceremony and when we elect church officers we want to make sure they're modest and so we call our chief ecclesiastical officer a clerk and we call our highest office a moderator. The Moderator presides at the annual meeting — the General Assembly — and then presides over the Church essentially for the next year, speaking and visiting presbyteries and synods and congregations and colleges and mission units in this country and also abroad, spending a fair amount of time in Louisville where the national church headquarters is located, interpreting everywhere what the Presbyterian Church is about and encouraging support. And so I will be traveling much of the next year.

In the meantime careful plans have already been laid to keep this church lively and creative. Staff responsibilities have been reconfigured. The Reverend Nancy Enderle will serve as Head of Staff and Moderator of the Session when I am not here. The Reverend David Donovan will be assisting Nancy as appropriate. The Reverend Dr. Jack Stotts, recently retired President of Austin Theological Seminary, formerly McCormick Theological Seminary President, will be moving into the Manse with his wife Virginia. Jack will be in the pulpit on most Sundays beginning in September.

I will continue as Pastor of the Church if there's room for me after all of that is in place. I will preach occasionally, next in October. I will read my mail, I promise, and check my voice mail. I do promise that. Obviously I won't be as accessible as I would like to be but I do wish to stay connected and to be engaged as Pastor as much as humanly possible.

Now you may have read in the paper about some of the things that happened when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met in Albuquerque. The Chicago Tribune printed a wire service story with the headline announcing "Presbyterians Decide to Ordain Gays." Let me tell you that is precisely the opposite from what the Assembly did. How in the world the wire service got that headline out of what the Assembly did boggles the mind.

Sexual orientation has never been an issue in the Presbyterian Church. Sexual practice has. In any event, many people were concerned that the Presbyterian Church could not avoid a split over this very important and controversial issue of whether or not to ordain gay and lesbian persons to Presbyterian ministry and to the offices of Deacon and Elder in the local congregation. For three years we've been studying and discussing the issue and the church is deeply divided. The Assembly committee looked at 46 separate overtures and submitted a report which essentially calls on the Presbyterian Church to amend its Constitution, adding to the section which contains the requirements for ordination, "fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness." A minority report signed by 19 members of that committee was presented first. It would have allowed local congregations and presbyteries to decide that issue on their own. After deliberation and debate that minority report was defeated by a margin of approximately 320 to 230. The majority report, the "fidelity in marriage, chastity in singleness" amendment, came before the house and it was adopted by the same margin, 320 to 230. It will now go to the 171 presbyteries of the church. Presbyterians will be talking about this on the local level throughout the year. A majority of those presbyteries must vote for the amendment for it to become part of the Constitution. So that is where we are.

The discussion in the Assembly was conducted with admirable civility and courtesy between people who are very deeply and passionately divided on this issue. Some of those people have a personal investment in the issue. For some of them it's not an abstraction at all.

When it became clear to me that the church was probably not going to vote to be more inclusive this year, I invited representatives of the people most personally involved immediately to talk about an appropriate response, a response that would affirm something of the unity of the Presbyterian Church but also to give them an opportunity to express their grief and disappointment. They requested time on the docket. I agreed and told the Assembly that I had, and so after the vote gay and lesbian Presbyterians and their families, parents, brothers and sisters, friends and a large group of supporters from throughout the country, walked into the convention center with great dignity, in total silence, singing a quiet song about walking in the light of God. There were at least a thousand people; many wore white stoles symbolizing their support for the movement, others wore colorful stoles representing Presbyterian ministers and elders and deacons who have died of AIDS in the last several years. There were members of the Presbytery of Chicago and members of this congregation who participated in that eloquent demonstration. Many of the commissioners rose to show their respect and their solidarity as I did.

It was, I thought, a particularly Presbyterian moment. The Church had debated and discussed the very difficult issue, had made a very difficult decision and now it was extending concern and love and acceptance to those people most affected by it.

Another particularly Presbyterian moment happened not long after that when the Assembly went on record approving and urging civil and legal rights for same-sex couples, carefully defining marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman and yet asking for and advocating both civil and legal rights for persons involved in a covenant relationship.

There were high points, obviously; recognizing 115 Native American
Presbyterian congregations was one; commissioning 400 mission personnel, volunteers and professionals, to do the work of mission through this next year; celebrating 40 new Presbyterian Churches organized last year; observing the wonderful role played in the Assembly and throughout the Presbyterian Church by young people. Youth Advisory Delegates are a part of the Assembly and we were honored this year to have one of our members, Erin Oliphant, as a Youth Advisory Delegate from the Presbytery of Chicago. Erin was very much a part of the whole experience.

The Moderator of the General Assembly, on behalf of the whole Presbyterian family, welcomes and greets Presbyterian Churches from other countries. It was my great pleasure to meet and spend time with the Moderators of the Presbyterian Church of Cuba, and Chile and Brazil and Malaysia, Korea, and Taiwan.

The Moderator doesn't have much actual authority in the Presbyterian Church other than the authority of persuasion, but the Moderator does have a voice and this moderator, as will be no surprise to you, intends to use it. I am going to urge the Presbyterian Church to get on with important business — hopefully the reinvention, the reconceptualizing, of the church for the next century. The old parish model just doesn't work in about 80% of our situations any more and we need to re-think how to be church for a new world. I hope to stimulate this church to reclaim its creative role in higher education. That's a natural for Presbyterians. We've got 60 colleges and universities — every one of which is asking how the gospel can be a part of the marketplace of ideas.

I hope to be instrumental in helping the Presbyterian Church to communicate better, to devise a way to be in the homes of every one of the Presbyterian families in the nation.

But the top priority for this church at this point in time is unity, to hold ourselves together, to call a cease fire in the cultural war which is raging and in which people demonize one another, call one another names, question faith and integrity.

There were some wonderful anecdotes in Albuquerque. Our whole family was there — all thirteen of us and my brother's family, seventeen in all. A nice group of friends from this congregation also came down to help as well as friends from Columbus, Ohio and even folks from Dyer, Indiana, my first congregation.

Prior to the election each moderatorial candidate has a small booth in which to present the case, as it were, to commissioners as they register and hand out brochures. You stand around the booth and greet commissioners and guests. Clearly we were outnumbering my two opponents. In fact, grandchildren running around and little Rachel scooting along the floor actually prevented commissioners from ever reaching the other two booths. You had to step over Rachel and most could not do that; looking at her they became enchanted and I think then voted for me.

Later, after the election, Norm Pott, one of the other candidates and a good friend of mine, said "next time remind me not to run against somebody with so many children and such beautiful grandchildren."

Our sophisticated campaign strategy was to forego the usual campaign buttons and instead to distribute to anyone who was interested in my candidacy a little ribbon of Buchanan plaid. It worked. There were many of them floating around the Assembly and people knew exactly what they meant. At the Assembly worship service the next morning, a huge Communion service for 3,000 people, a glorious worship experience, the processional in which all the participants were involved was accompanied by a bagpipe band playing "Amazing Grace" with tympany, and symbols and snare drums. It was a stirring moment, and when the pipe band turned the corner and came down the aisle, there they were, all in Buchanan plaid kilts. It was a lovely coincidence. During the recessional as I walked down the aisle, a friend leaned into the aisle and said quietly, "that must have cost Fourth Church a pretty penny!"

Now I wear the Moderatorial stole, with the symbols of the Church, and the cross, the Moderator's cross. And I wish to tell you just a bit about it. This cross is the result of a dream of Harrison Ray Anderson for the unity of the Presbyterian Church. Anderson was pastor here, 1928 to 1961. He was also a Moderator of the General Assembly as was his predecessor, John Timothy Stone. Anderson worked all his life for the reunion and unity of the Presbyterian Churches in this country. His great-grandfather had made the motion at the General Assembly in 1861 that split the Presbyterian Church into two — North and South. Harrison Ray Anderson worked tirelessly all his life to heal that division which his great-grandfather had precipitated. One time, on an overseas journey representing our Church and visiting the Island of Iona, he purchased two celtic crosses, these lovely symbols of the Presbyterian tradition. He purchased them, by the way, with money given to him by the Japanese congregation which was worshiping in this building during the Second World War and the years immediately after. He brought the crosses home and gave one to the Moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church and gave the other to the Moderator of the Northern Presbyterian Church, toward the day when the two churches would become one and the two crosses would be joined. The third cross was later purchased and given to the Moderator of a small Presbyterian branch — the United Presbyterian Church.

In 1958 in Pittsburgh the first step was taken toward reunion. Two of those churches united and Anderson must have witnessed that. Finally in 1983, 122 years after his great-grandfather made the motion, and four years after his own death, the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches finally reunited at the meeting of the General Assembly in Atlanta. A welder came onto the stage to join the three crosses. It was a glorious moment when these three crosses were joined together in a memorable ceremony. Ever since Moderators of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have been wearing this cross! I wear it now, as a symbol of the unity of our church, but also a symbol of something else. It is a symbol for me, always, of that congregation Harrison Ray Anderson loved, and which I love very much, which incorporates so very much of what is important about the Presbyterian Church.

Thank you for your encouragement and your support, for allowing me to be away next year, and for your prayers in the days ahead.